

Count down

As the 30-hour offer nears full roll-out, *Karen Faux* finds out how schools are planning to cope



In many ways, schools are in a strong position to provide the 30 hours' free entitlement to nursery education, due to roll out nationally in September this year. Nursery provision linked to a school typically provides high-quality early education and can ensure continuity across the crucial transition to Reception. The expanded offer also provides a fantastic opportunity for primaries to raise outcomes for children through early interventions, boost league table results and benefit local communities.

But the move to expand early years has come at possibly one of the worst times for schools. With continued pressure on capacity and funding – particularly in light of the new school funding formula proposals – many are struggling to fund their existing nursery provision and say they are subsidising it from the rest of the school budget in a way that is unsustainable.

When, in 2015, the school leaders union NAHT conducted a survey

examining the viability of extended childcare in schools, it found there was a risk that schools would pull back from early years provision, just as the Government's commitment to it was being ramped up. The survey also highlighted a concern that extended free hours would reduce the overall number of places, potentially squeezing out those three- and four-year-olds who are ineligible for the 30 hours but stand to gain most from a high-quality nursery experience.

MEETING THE CHALLENGES

While local authority funding for nursery schools and primary school nursery classes reflects the higher costs involved in being a school with a head and qualified teachers, schools are faced with the prospect of a £4 an hour rate for the additional 15 hours.

The NAHT's 2015 survey found the majority of schools cannot cover the cost of their existing nursery provision. More than 70 per cent said they received less than £5 an hour for

Cypress Primary School in Croydon, which reports mixed feelings about the 30-hour offer (see case study)

three- and four-year-old places, and over half said they would need more than £3 an hour in additional funding to make the expanded hours viable.

Lack of capacity is another problem. More than half of the survey's 790 respondents said they lacked the space to take on more children, but of those, nearly half thought they would be able to do so if capital funding were made available. Doubling the number of hours that children are catered for is not as simple as doubling the number of places. Extra rooms, catering facilities and equipment, new activities and additional staff are required to deliver the extended hours.

At Hindley Sure Start Nursery School in Wigan, which is delivering 26 30-hour places as part of the pilot, head teacher Rachel Lewis says, 'A priority for us is to ensure we are meeting the needs of children who are now attending nursery for a full day, and we have had to consider the routines and activities that we provide. We have had to plan >

CASE STUDIES

Surbiton Children's Centre Nursery

At Surbiton Children's Centre Nursery, head teacher Fiona Dearman corroborates that partnership working between schools and other local providers is key to offering parents choice and flexibility in how they access their 30 hours. 'This is certainly the message from our pilot,' she says. 'Here it is already happening but at the same time we are recognising that it is important that schools work out what is best for them.'

The Outstanding nursery school has been offering extended daycare for over 15 years and currently has 40 of the 118 children in the school accessing extended hours over their 15-hour free education entitlement. 'In September it is hoped that the 30 hours will be offered to an additional eight children,' says Ms Dearman.

Children access their 15 hours across the week in a classroom led by a nursery teacher with QTS status. They can have a three-hour morning or afternoon session. Their

additional hours are taken in the Ladybird Class, supervised by a Level 6 practitioner. This offers a 'chilled', home-from-home environment where they can choose their own activities, and it is where they eat their meals.

Looking ahead, Ms Dearman feels that funding will be the biggest problem. 'As a maintained setting we are currently receiving £6.11 an hour for each child's 15 hours of nursery education, and the Government have now assured us that this will stay as it is until the end of Parliament. We will then receive the same amount given to other settings, which is less.'

'In September we will be offering the additional 15 hours of childcare at a reduced rate, which does raise the question of how we will maintain the high quality of provision, when we need to retain qualified staff for the full 30 hours.'

Cypress Primary School, Croydon

Cypress has capacity for 24 two-year-olds and 26 nursery-

aged children in each morning and afternoon session, though many parents opt for a full-time place for their children. With space at a premium and unable to expand, meeting demand for 30-hour places may now mean sacrificing the much-needed income currently received from provision beyond the 15-hour entitlement.

Assistant head teacher Ailsa Chapman, who works in the school's nursery and pre-school unit, Little Cypress, says, 'We are currently evaluating the extent to which we will be able to participate in the 30-hour offer. We have been offering top-ups to the free entitlements, in terms of a full-time place, for many years and this helps to keep our provision sustainable.'

'We are concerned that this will limit the number of children we can have for 30 hours and may be to the detriment of those children who have the 15 hours, but not 30, because their parents do not work. We will have to prioritise who we

will take on the basis of the school admissions criteria, which places looked-after children, siblings, medical considerations and distance from the school as the order of priorities.

'From my point of view, it's a fantastic bonus for working parents but tricky for the school, as what the Government pays per hour is less than we can charge for full-time places. Also, 30 hours means providing lunch or asking children to bring a packed lunch. This has implications for where the children eat, and having to charge for lunches as the Government funding will not cover food.'



the 30 hours and what session times we could accommodate that would retain some structure and allow us to continue to focus on the learning needs of the children.'

Children at Hindley access their 30 hours from 9am to 3pm, Monday to Friday, during term-time. Before its introduction, the nursery school had only a few children staying for lunch so it had to rearrange staff and furniture to accommodate a larger group. Ms Lewis says, 'Staff have also had to consider how planning has to adapt to meet the needs of children so they are not repeating the same session from the morning in the afternoon.'

CLUSTER GROUPS

The 30-hour pilots are demonstrating that one of the most effective approaches for schools is partnership working, supported by the formation of cluster groups comprised of local providers. In Wigan, which has created 415 places, for example, cluster meetings are helping schools and settings to come together to dis-

cuss implementation and share what has worked well. They are identifying issues, collaborating to provide training for staff and even sharing case studies highlighting how the offer has impacted individual family circumstances.

Ms Lewis reports the clusters are currently working together to ensure there is flexibility and an effective response to parents' needs. She says, 'Although my school has limited flexibility, the PVI settings in my cluster can offer greater flexibility by working together, and in this way we are ensuring that we are meeting the different needs of our parents, across the locality.'

'We have a range of schools and settings, including PVIs, childminders, primary schools, and primary schools with wraparound care. The primary schools are working in partnership with the wraparound private provision on site to deliver the 30 hours. If a setting in the cluster can't accommodate a parent in this, the request can go back to the cluster for



MORE INFORMATION

- *An Early Years Place for All* – NAHT survey on extending childcare provision in schools, www.naht.org.uk/welcome/news-and-media/key-topics/funding/an-early-years-place-for-all
- *Childcare Works* – DfE-funded national programme to support implementation of the 30 hours entitlement, www.childcareworks.co.uk

the other settings to consider if they can meet their needs – like a brokerage system. By working in this way, not only are we providing a responsive service, but also working to each setting's strengths.'

It seems that where schools can overcome the financial and logistical challenges to deliver the extended offer, there are long-term benefits. Ms Lewis says, 'We are now giving children even more opportunities for fresh air and physical activity. Staff who are working with the 30-hour children are seeing that they are making great progress as they are in nursery for longer. Key workers are finding it easier to gather observations and track progress as they have more time to spend with children.'

Participation in cluster groups can provide the impetus for schools to be proactively involved. Ms Lewis says, 'It is important, in Wigan and in our school, that we have had a can-do attitude to change. This positive approach has been important to the success of the project.' ■